

**What's  
so bad  
about**



[This article originally appeared in the form of a comic distributed to business majors at public universities across the United States. Certain scandalous parts of it were reprinted in the COINTELPRO handbook update 1998 and the Wall Street Journal, among other publications.]

## **What is capitalism, anyway?**

Capitalism. That's like *democracy*, isn't it?

(And aren't the enemies of capitalism the opponents of democracy? Didn't we defeat them in the Cold War?)

Actually, capitalism and democracy are two very different things. Democracy is, essentially, the idea that people should have control over their lives, that power should be shared by all rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. Capitalism is something altogether different.

In the United States (and other Western nations), we're used to hearing that we live in a democratic society. It's true that we have a *government* that calls itself democratic (although whether each of us really has an equal say, or much of a say at all, in such a bloated and atrophied "representative democracy" is worth asking), but whether our *society* is itself democratic is another question entirely. Government is only one aspect of society, of course; and it is far from the most important one, when it comes to considering day to day life. The economic system of any given society has more influence over daily life than any court or congress could: for it is economics that decides who has control over the lands, resources, and tools of the society, what people have to do each day to survive and "get ahead," and ultimately how those people interact with each other and view the world.

And capitalism is, in fact, one of the *least* democratic economic systems. In a "democratic" economy, each member of the society would have an equal say in how resources are used and how work is done. But in the capitalist economy, in which all resources are private property and everyone competes against each other for them, most resources end up under the control of a few people (today, read: corporations). Those people can decide how everyone else will work, since most of the others can't live without earning money from them. They even get to determine the physical and psychological landscape of the society, since they own most of the land and control most of the media. And at bottom, *they* aren't really in control, either, for if they let their guard down and stop working to keep ahead they will quickly be at the bottom of the pyramid with everybody else; that means *nobody* truly has freedom under the capitalist system: everyone is equally at the mercy of the laws of competition.

**capital: wealth (money, property, or labor) . . . which can be used to create more wealth. example: factory owners who profit from selling goods created by the labor of workers in their factories are able to purchase more factories.**

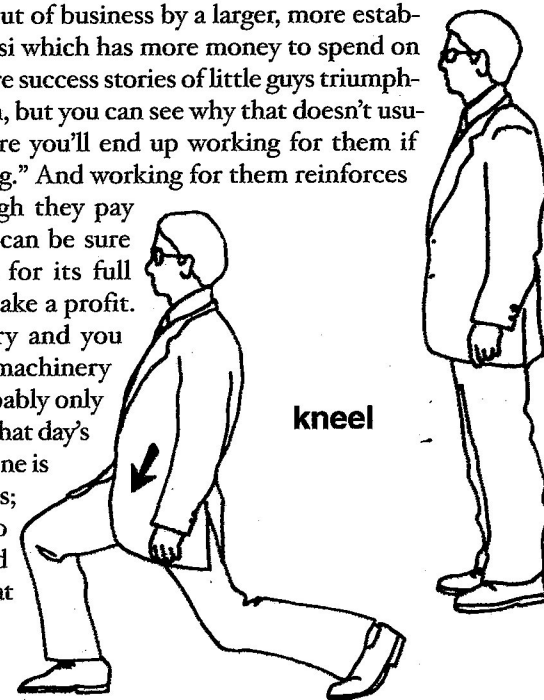
**capitalism: the “free exchange of goods and services” . . . in which those who have capital are able to collect more, at the expense of those who do not.**

### ***How does capitalism work?***

Here's how the free market is *supposed* to work: people are free to seek their fortunes as they choose, and the ones who work the hardest and provide the greatest value to society are rewarded with the greatest wealth. But this system has a crucial flaw: it doesn't actually offer equal opportunities for everyone. Success in the “free market” depends almost entirely on how much wealth you already have.

When capital is privately owned, an individual's opportunities to learn, work, and earn wealth are directly tied to the amount of wealth she has. A few scholarships can't offset this. It takes resources of some kind to produce something of value, and if a person doesn't have those resources herself she finds she is at the mercy of those who do. Meanwhile, those who already have those resources can make more and more wealth, and eventually most of the wealth of the society ends up in hands of a few. This leaves everyone else with little capital to sell other than their own labor, which they must sell to the capitalists (those who control most of the means of production) to survive.

This sounds confusing, but it's actually pretty simple. A corporation like Nike has plenty of extra money to open up a new shoe factory, buy new advertisements, and sell more shoes, thus earning themselves more money to invest. A poor sucker like you barely has enough money to open up a lemonade stand, and even if you did you would probably be run out of business by a larger, more established company like Pepsi which has more money to spend on promotion (sure, there are success stories of little guys triumphing over the competition, but you can see why that doesn't usually happen). Chances are you'll end up working for them if you need to earn a “living.” And working for them reinforces their power: for although they pay you for your work, you can be sure they're not paying you for its full value: that's how they make a profit. If you work at a factory and you make \$1000 worth of machinery parts every day, you probably only get paid \$100 or less for that day's labor. That means someone is cashing in on your efforts; and the longer they do that, the more wealth and opportunities *they* have, at *your* expense.



## How does this affect the average guy?

This means that your time and creative energy are being bought from you, which is the worst part of all. When all you have to sell in return for the means to survive is your own labor, you are forced to sell your life away in increments just to exist. You end up spending the greater part of your life doing whatever you can get paid the most for, instead of what you really want to do: you trade your dreams for salaries and your freedom to act for material possessions. In your "free" time you can buy back what you made during your time at work (at a profit to your employers, of course); but you can never buy back the *time* you spent at work. That part of your life is gone and you have nothing to show for it but the bills you were able to pay. Eventually



you start to think of your own creative abilities and labor power as beyond your control, for you come to associate doing anything but "relaxing" (recovering from work) with the misery of doing what you are *told* rather than what you want. The idea of acting on your own initiative and pursuing your own goals no longer occurs to you except when it comes to working on your hobbies.

Yes, there are a few people who find ways to get paid to do exactly what they've always wanted to. But how many of the working people you know fit into that category? These rare, lucky individuals are held up to us as proof that the system works, and we are exhorted to work really, really hard so that one day we can be as lucky as they

are, too. The truth is that there are simply not enough job openings for everyone to be a rock star or syndicated cartoonist; somebody has to work in the factories to mass produce the records and newspapers. If you don't succeed in becoming the next world-famous basketball star, and end up selling athletic shoes in a mall instead, you must not have tried hard enough . . . so it's your fault if you're bored there, right? But it wasn't your idea that there should be one thousand shoe salesmen for every professional basketball player. If anything, you can only be blamed for accepting a situation that offers such poor odds. Rather than all competing to be the one at the top of the corporate ladder or the one in a million lottery winner, we should be trying to figure out how to make it possible for *all of us* to do what we want with our lives. For even if you are lucky enough to come out on top, what about the thousands and thousands who didn't make it—the unhappy office clerks, the failed artists, listless grill cooks and fed up hotel maids? Is it in *your* best interest to live in a world filled with people who aren't happy, who never got to chase their dreams . . . who maybe never even got to have dreams?

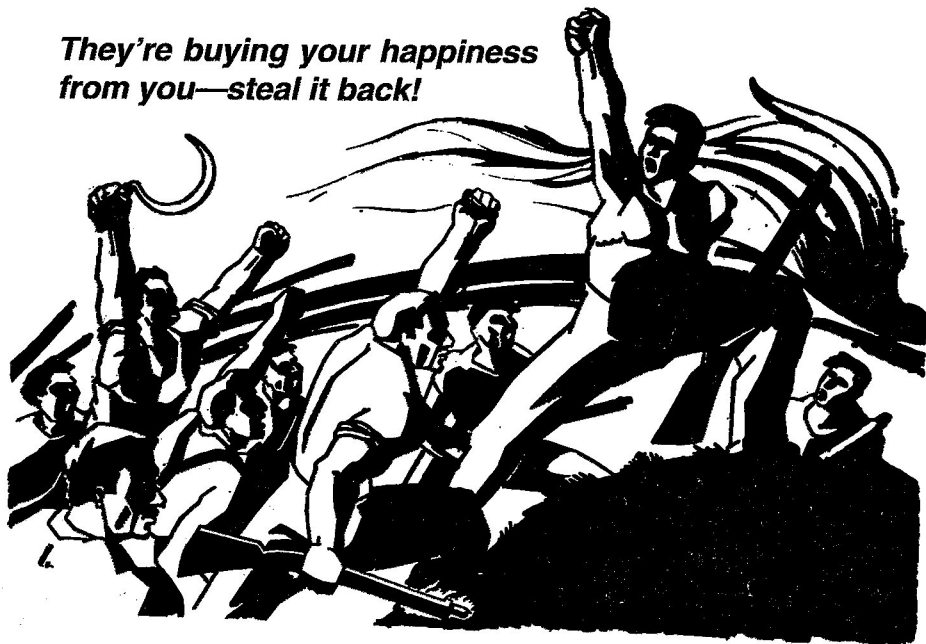
## What does capitalism make people value?

As Jeanette writes in her article on product and process, under capitalism our lives end up revolving around *things*, as if happiness is to be found in possessions rather than in free actions and pursuits. Those who have wealth have it because they spend a lot of time and energy figuring out how to get it from other people. Those who have very little have to spend most of their lives working to get what they need to survive, and all they have as consolation for their lives of hard labor and poverty are the few things they are able to afford to buy—since their *lives* themselves have been bought from them. Between those two social classes are the members of the middle class, who have been bombarded from birth with advertisements and other propaganda proclaiming that happiness, youth, meaning, and everything else in life are to be found in possessions and status symbols. They learn to spend their lives working hard to collect these, rather than taking advantage of whatever chances they might have to seek adventure and pleasure.

Thus capitalism centers everyone's values around what they *have* rather than what they *do*, by making them spend their lives competing for the things they need to survive and achieve social standing. People might be more likely to find happiness in a society that encouraged them to value their ability to act freely and do what they want above

all else. To create such a society, we will have to stop competing for control and wealth, and start to share them more freely; only then will everyone be completely free to choose the lives they most want to live, without fear of going hungry or being shut out of society.

**They're buying your happiness from you—steal it back!**



**“But doesn't competition lead to productivity?”**

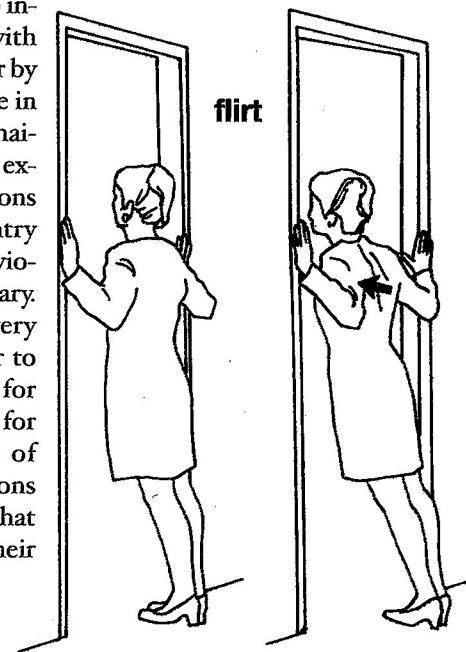
Yes—that's the problem. The competitive “free market” economy not only encourages productivity at all costs, it *enforces* it: for those who do not stay ahead of the competition are trodden under it. And what costs, exactly, are we talking about here? For one thing, there are the long hours we spend at work: forty, fifty, sometimes even sixty hours a week, at the beck and call of bosses and/or customers, working until we're well past exhausted in the race to “get ahead.” On top of this, there are the low wages we're paid: most of us aren't paid nearly enough to afford a share of all the things our society has to offer, even though it is our labor that makes them possible. This is because in the competitive market, workers aren't paid what they “deserve” for their labor—they're paid the *smallest* amount their employer can pay without them leaving to look for better wages. That's the “law” of supply and demand. The employer has to do this, because he needs to save as much extra capital as he can for advertising, corporate expansion, and

other ways to try to keep ahead of the competition. Otherwise, he might not be an employer for long, and his employees will end up working for a more “competitive” master.

There's a word for those long hours and unfair wages: exploitation. But that's not the only cost of the “productivity” our competitive system encourages. Employers have to cut corners in a thousand other ways, too: that's why our work environments are often unsafe, for example. And if it takes doing things that are ecologically destructive to make money and stay productive, an economic system that rewards productivity above all else gives corporations no reason to resist trampling over wildlife and wilderness to make a buck. That's where our forests went, that's where the ozone layer went, that's where hundreds of species of wild animals went: they were burned up in our rat race. In place of forests, we now have shopping malls and gas stations, not to mention air pollution, because it's more important to have places to buy and sell than it is to preserve environments of peace and beauty. In place of buffalo and bald eagles, we have animals locked in factory farms, turned into milk and meat machines... and singing cartoon animals in Disney movies, the closest thing to wild animals some of us ever see. Our competitive economic system forces us to replace everything free and beautiful with the efficient, the uniform, the profitable.

This isn't limited to our own countries and cultures, of course. Capitalism and its values have spread across the world like a disease.

Competing companies have to keep increasing their markets to keep up with each other, whether by persuasion or by force; that's why you can buy a Coke in Egypt and eat at McDonalds in Thailand. Throughout history we can see examples of how capitalist corporations have forced their way into one country after another, not hesitating to use violence where they deemed it necessary. Today, human beings in almost every corner of the world sell their labor to multinational corporations, often for less than a dollar an hour, in return for the chance to chase the images of wealth and status those corporations use to tantalize them. The wealth that their labor creates is sucked out of their



communities into the pockets of these companies, and in return their unique cultures are replaced by the standard-issue monoculture of Western consumerism. By the same token, people in these countries can hardly afford not to seek to be competitive and "productive" themselves in the same ways that those exploiting them are. Consequently, the whole world is being standardized under one system, the capitalist system . . . and it is getting hard for people to imagine any other way of doing things.

So—what *kind* of productivity does competition encourage? It encourages material productivity alone—that is, profit at any expense. We don't get higher *quality* products, for it is in the manufacturers' best interest that we return to buy from them again when our cars and stereos break down after a few years. We don't get the products that are most relevant to our lives and pursuit of happiness, either: we get the products that are easiest and most profitable to sell. We get credit card companies, telemarketers, junk mail, cigarettes carefully designed to contain eight different addictive chemicals. In order that one company may outsell its competitors, *we* end up spending *our*

***Competition means that we don't get to come together and decide what would best for ourselves and the world as a group; nor do we get to decide those things as individuals. Instead, the projects our species undertakes and the changes we make in the world are decided by the laws of competition, by whatever SELLS the most.***

lives working to develop, mass-produce, and purchase things like garbage disposal units, conveniences that raise our standard of survival without actually improving our quality of life. Much more than better blenders or video games or potato chips, we need more *meaning* and *pleasure* in our lives, but we're all so busy competing that we don't even have time to think about it.

Surely in a less competitive society, we could still produce all the things we need, without being forced to produce all the frivolous extra stuff that is presently filling up our landfills. And maybe then we could concentrate our efforts on learning how to produce the most important thing of all: human happiness.

